

Suburban expansion of Brussels: the Croÿ manor house as representational architecture in relation to the urban residence

Resume

This paper presents a crucial aspect of the residential policy of a nobleman from the Habsburg Low Countries. Charles II of Croÿ – as one of the highest ranking noblemen in the Low Countries of that time – inherited a residence in Brussels for which he had extensive embellishment plans, initiated in 1600. Complementary he bought two domains in St. Josse, just outside the city ramparts: one domain with *maison de plaisance* and another property with a more traditional manor house, previously belonging to the dukes of Brabant. We will examine the interplay between urban and suburban residence, taking into account the particular representational role both residences played. The Croÿ residence in St. Josse was indeed the scene of the reception of the English ambassadors in the early seventeenth century.

Este artigo apresenta um aspeto crucial da política residencial de um nobre dos Habsburgos dos Países Baixos. Charles II de Croÿ – um dos mais altos nobres ranking nos Países Baixos daquele temp – herdou uma residência em Bruxelas para a qual teve extensos planos de embelezamento, iniciados em 1600. Em complemento, adquiriu duas propriedades em St. Josse, no exterior das muralhas da cidade: um domínio com o *maison de plaisance* e uma mais tradicional casa senhorial, previamente pertencente aos Duques de Brabant. Ser examinada a interação entre a residência urbana e suburban tendo em conta o papel de representação particular de ambas a residências. A residência Croÿ no St. Josse era, de facto, o cenário de receção dos embaixadores ingleses no início do século XVII.

Suburban expansion of Brussels: the Croÿ manor house as representational architecture in relation to the urban residence

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Introduction

On Saturday 24 May 1605, English ambassadors visited the *maison de plaisance* of Charles II of Croÿ in St. Josse-ten-Node, outside Brussels. According to a contemporary description of the festivities they were treated to a “disner & soupper en ung sien jardin de plaisance aux fauxbourgz de ceste ville” (Pinchart 1874, p. 10). The significance of this visit is apparent from the effort that was put in the excursion. It was the only ceremonial festivity during their visit that did not take place in the ducal palace at the Coudenberg. It seems that Charles II of Croÿ even built his *maison de plaisance* partly for the purpose of receiving the ambassadors, with the arms of Châtillon and Craon integrated in one of the glass paintings.²

This *maison de plaisance* was only one of three important constructions belonging to the duke of Aarschot in the Brussels territory (fig. 1). He was the only Grandee of Spain outside the Spanish territory and thus one of the highest noblemen in the Low Countries of that time. As first chamberlain of the duke a residence in Brussels seemed a given. We will focus first on the city residence just across the Coudenberg palace, as this was one of the oldest properties of the Croÿ. It was in their possession since Anton of Croÿ (1385-1475) and testifies to their long-lasting position of *günstling* (Châtelet 2004, p. 482-487), or favourite, to the Burgundian – and later Habsburg – dukes. Charles of Croÿ had extensive renovation plans for this residence. Secondly, we will look at the suburban villa in St. Josse-ten-Node, just a few minutes



Figure 1: Map of Brussels by Jacob Deventer (ca 1500-1575). © Koninklijke Bibliotheek België (<http://uurl.kbr.be/1043770>).

walk from the city residence. This actually consisted of two domains, separated by the paved road that connected Brussels with Leuven, and here too he had plans to enlarge the domain and its buildings.

The noble residence played a fundamental role in expressing the self-image and aspirations of a nobleman. In particular, to live nobly, one had to possess a fitting residence (De Clercq ea. 2007, p.

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² “(...) y at une toure quarree ou y at par embas une petite chambre paincte, avecq sa cheminee, ayant regard sur les foeillies et jardin de derriere, illuminee de deux voirieres ou sont les armoiries de Chastillon et Craon, estant lad(icte) toure joindant voires au de lad(icte) belle foeillie (...)” Quote from the description of the domain ‘La Fontaine’. (AAE, case 66/2). This could be a reference to the battle at Châtillon (1591) and Craon (1592), during the French religious wars.

15 & Buylaert 2011, p. 413). It represented power to the informed observer and its location, space and form carry multiple meanings. In this paper we will examine how the building mania of Charles II of Croÿ for the Brussels territory contributed to establishing his position as ‘alter rex’ or one of the most powerful noblemen in the Low Countries.

Charles II of Croÿ was the last heir of a powerful dynasty originating from Picardy, France. During the Burgundian reign they drifted across the Habsburg-Valois boundary (Spangler 2011, p. 131-154) to become one of the highest nobles of Hainaut, where they built their main power base. For decades they ensured their position through canny acquisition tactics and marriage strategies, leading up to an extensive patrimony at the end of the 16th century, when Charles II of Croÿ became the head of the family. This expansion policy led to possessions spread out through the entire southern part of the Low Countries, with main clusters around Aarschot, Beaumont and Comines.

The Croÿ as commissioners of garden architecture

After his father's death in 1595, Charles II of Croÿ became the head of the dynasty and, as he was to die childless, the last male heir of the extensive Croÿ patrimony.³ He always had been an ambitious patron of the arts and literature and since the beginning of the 1590s he became obsessed with record-keeping. The numerous descriptions and documents for the administration of his possessions are a silent witness to this mania.⁴



This obsession returns in the gardens of Saint-Josse and Heverlee, in which he collected the most valuable flowers, herbs and trees (Sabbe 1990, p. 84-87). It seems that he shared this interest with his father, Philippe of Croÿ. It was indeed Philippe who had commissioned the extensive gardens of the residence at Chimay, which were later partly redesigned by Charles (De Jonge 1999, p. 196) (fig. 2). These gardens were subdivided into parquets with alternating trees, together with a water feature. It is here that we first see an independent garden pavilion looking out over the water and the surrounding gardens.

This interest seems to have passed from father to son, as it was Charles II of Croÿ who finished the gardens of the castle at Heverlee. They too were subdivided in parquets with trees at the corners and in the middle, a recurring element in the different gardens commissioned by Charles II of Croÿ (De Jonge 1999, p. 194-198). That Charles of Croÿ was indeed highly interested in nature and gardening is demonstrated by his library, which contained over 60 works on agriculture, as well as books on the medicinal properties of plants and flowers⁵ (Van Even 1852, p. 14).

Nobles in Brussels – Planets orbiting the sun

As Brussels draws the court constantly it also played a prominent role in the itinerary of Charles II of Croÿ. Ever since the fourteenth century Brussels had been gaining importance to the Burgundian

³ This might explain his obsession with genealogy, which was one of the main themes of the stained glass windows in the *maison de plaisance* at St. Josse. He also commissioned several illustrated genealogies: *Généalogie des Hauses von Croy* (Dülmen, Hs 7) & De Bie 1601.

⁴ Many of these administrative documents are still preserved for the duchy of Aarschot (KUL AA, n°1216 (Besoigné), n°2423 (Descriptions and primitive cadastral maps), n°2467 (Guidelines for court officials)).

⁵ Charles of Croÿ even authored a book on agriculture: “Abrégé touchant l’agriculture, recueilli et mis en écrit par nous, Charles, syre et duc de Croy et d’Arschot, dédié à madame Dorothee, duchesse de Croy et d’Arschot, nostre femme, 1606” (Gachard 1842, p. 377).

and later Habsburg sovereigns (Uyttnebrouck 1991, p. 838). This led to a flourishing urban economy and brought wealth to the city. It also provoked a true building mania among the nobles who began populating the hilly slopes around the Coudenberg palace. Anton of Croÿ obtained the domain opposite the Baliënhof from Filip Blondeel in 1432 already, after which the city paid for a new representative residence on the site (Duvosquel 1995, p. 63-78). Other nobles such as the Nassau and the Arenberg found their place further down the slope in the Petit Sablon area.

During the following decades the successive Croÿ princes bought the neighboring plots in order to enlarge this city residence (Duvosquel 2002, p. 262-266). However, by the time Charles II of Croÿ inherited the complex in 1595, the Iconoclastic Fury of 1579 had left the residence, which was plundered several times, without any of its interior finishings. Charles of Croÿ thus had major refurbishment plans for the property. Already in 1596 – only one year after the death of his father and his inheritance – he ordered Pierre Lepoivre to draw a plan of the residence, together with which an inventory was composed (KUL AA n°2420 bis verso & Duvosquel 2002, p. 262-266 & De Jonge 2014, p. 106-110). Thereafter several other plans and drawings followed for facades, porticos and fireplaces (KUL AA n° 2462-2464). These reparations happened almost simultaneously with the repair works of the Coudenberg palace directed by the archdukes.⁶ One of the most significant additions to the residence carried out by Charles was the addition of a Baliën court to the front of the residence facing the ducal palace (fig. 3). A similar structure hedged the Coudenberg palace in the sixteenth century. It almost seems like a mirror image of the one surrounding the ducal palace, testifying to the high aspirations of the commissioner.

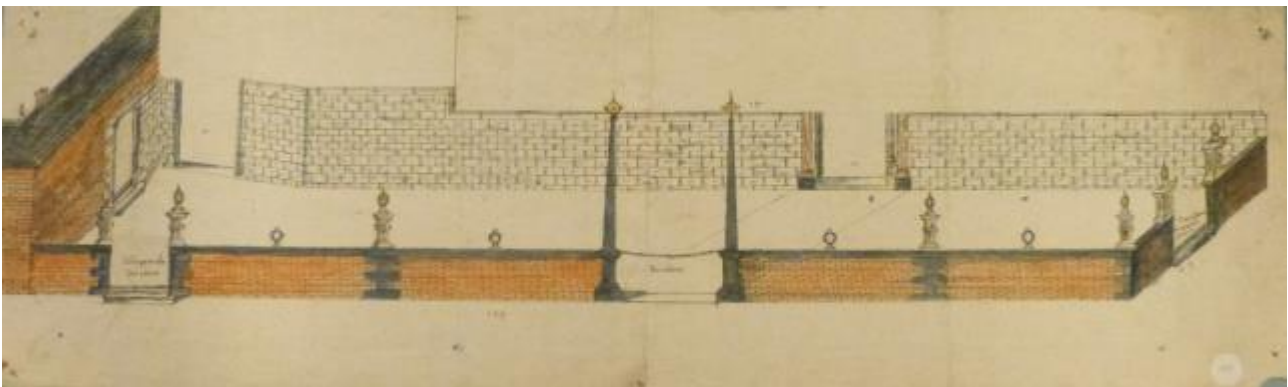


Figure 3: design for the Baliën court of the Croÿ residence. © KU Leuven

Croÿ & St. Josse – representation of power through real-estate

Since there was no room for gardens in the city residence, Charles of Croÿ acquired two domains just outside the Brussels city walls, in St. Josse-ten-Node. This suburb, which depended of the congregation of St. Gudula (Wauters 1857, p. 1-64), was located in the Maalbeek valley along the paved road to Leuven, and consisted of some houses, a chapel and several big ponds and watermills. These ponds played a vital role in the new waterworks system that was commissioned by the archdukes Albert and Isabella.⁷ To get to these domains Charles of Croÿ could make a 15-minute walk across the Baliën court, through the garden of the Coudenberg palace and through the

⁶ As Philippe II preferred to stay in Spain, Brussels was disregarded as a place of residence, so the Coudenberg palace stayed in a partially destroyed state until the archdukes arrived. They undertook major restorations and added one floor to the residential wing (Smolar-Meynaert, 1995, p. 15-28).

⁷ This waterworks system consisted of an ingenious hydraulic machine which provided the gardens of the Coudenberg palace with water.

city gate leading to Leuven and 500 meters outside the city ramparts he reached his *maison de plaisance*.⁸

One of the domains was the former domain and vigne of the seneschal of Brabant, a fully-fledged moated castle along the road to Leuven. It consisted out of a lower court which he completed with a stable block⁹ and an upper court with the actual residence. The entrance to his residence consisted of a stone bridge supported by three arches followed by a wooden drawbridge, flanked by two towers. By the end of the sixteenth century this composition had lost all military meaning, but the symbolic power of these military elements testified to the owner's status and conspicuous spending (De Clercq et al. 2007, p. 15). In this case the decision to leave the outer appearance of the residence unaltered can be considered a conscious one, as this was once the residence of the seneschal of Brabant, thus representing a direct link to the Burgundian past.

The residence itself was organized around an inner courtyard. An open gallery bounded the yard to the north. The chapel was directly accessible from the gallery and had an oratory next to it, together with a staircase to the apartment of the duke. This private route made it possible for Charles II of Croÿ to go to his oratory without being seen by servants. On the other side of the courtyard was the *salle* that was provided with a beer and wine fountain. Adjacent to the *salle* were two *chambres* with accompanying *garderobes*. Close to the entrance of the *salle* was a flight of stairs which provided direct access to the cellars from the courtyard. On the first floor, the courtyard was surrounded by representative galleries.¹⁰ This castle was thus a completely independent functioning residence as it had its own kitchen quarters, cellars and rooms for the staff.

***Jardin de plaisance* - the garden pavilion at St. Josse**



Figure 4: inv. L 1998/12, Musée de la Ville

The second domain was situated just across the paved road connecting Brussels with Leuven.¹¹ When it came into the possession of Charles II of Croÿ in 1595 it was almost empty, consisting of a little tower-shaped pavilion and some accompanying houses for service. Next to the pavilion was a rectangular water feature, shown on a drawing of 1596 (KUL AA, n° 2459). This typology of leisure houses was not uncommon in the suburban belt that surrounded Brussels. A drawing made by Franciscus Iosephus Derons shows a similar little tower-shaped pavilion called *speelhuijs* in the hamlet of Vleurgat, south of Brussels (fig. 4) (De

Jonge 2003, p. 276). Charles II of Croÿ has – again – major extension

plans for this domain. Firstly, he wanted to enlarge the territory by buying neighbouring plots. It seems that by the time he wrote his will in 1605 he still had not acquired all the surrounding domains he wanted, because he left very clear instructions for his wife to keep buying the neighbouring plots, even after his



Figure 5: reconstruction of the maison de plaisance © Sanne Maekelberg, KU Leuven

⁸ An account of may 1600 shows that he actually used this route as he paid the porter of the ducal park to cross through on his way back to the city residence. “A la concierge du parc de la Cour par où S.E. passe retournant de son jardin le soir, 10 sols”. (De Villermont, 1923, p. 254)

⁹ According to the contemporary description for no less than 52 horses. (AAE, case 60/12).

¹⁰ This overview is based on plans that are now lost but of which photographs are kept in the State Archives in Brussels. Here the copies from the article of Chris De Maegd were used for the analysis (De Maegd, 2001, p. 48-49 & 57).

¹¹ A design for a bridge crossing this hollow road and connecting both domains was made by Pierre Lepoivre (KUL AA, n° 2461)

death (De Reiffenberg 1845, p. 284). The plans that are still preserved show that Charles II of Croÿ also had plans for a new and bigger leisure house, designed according to the modern fashion of the time. The instructions on the floor plan tell us that the existing service houses should be incorporated in the new *maison de plaisance*, making it a large L-shaped volume along and crossing the already existing water feature.¹² These plans combined with the contemporary description of the domain (AAE, box 60/12, no n°) allow us to make a model of the *maison de plaisance*, centrally located in the area (fig. 5). A gallery with 19 windows offered a view on the surrounding gardens from both sides.¹³ This long gallery was the main stage of the reception of the ambassadors in 1605 and it must have particularly appealed to the English visitors. The long gallery was followed by another smaller gallery perpendicular to the first, after which several representational rooms with fireplaces followed. The same sequence was repeated on the first floor. Vertical circulation was assured by two staircases on either end of both wings. The existing buildings were integrated into the new construction and a new staircase tower was added to the already existing leisure pavilion (fig. 6)

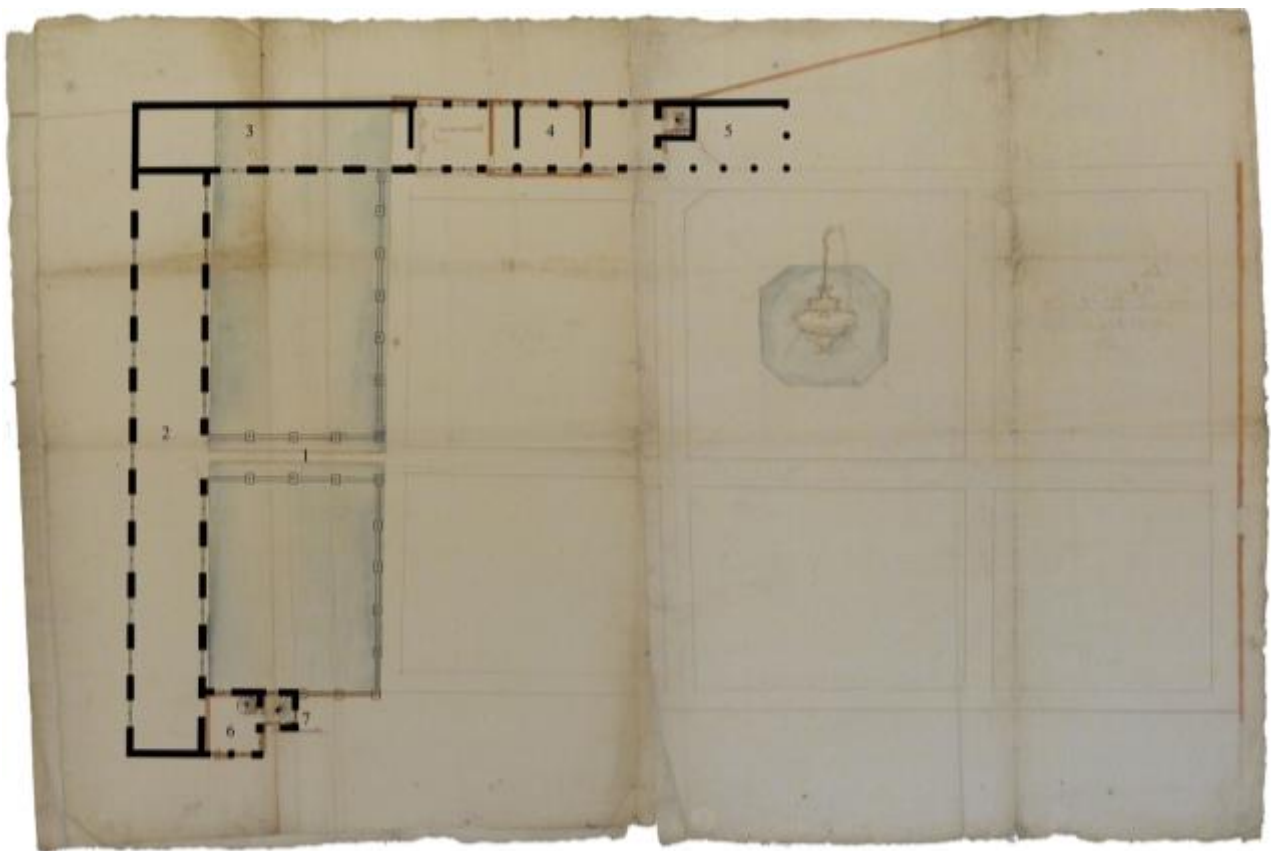


Figure 6: reconstruction of the floor plan (© Sanne Maekelberg, KU Leuven) projected on a map of the domain (KUL AA n°2459). 1: acces bridge, 2: long gallery, 3: perpendicular gallery, 4: representative chambres, 5: open gallery (could serve as entrance), 6: original 'speelhuijs', 7: new staircase tower.

Gardens represented

Surrounding the garden pavilion were beautiful gardens divided in parquets. These round, square or even heart-shaped forms were filled with the most exquisite flowers, herbs and trees. Inbetween these parquets were so-called *feuillées*, wooden arch-shaped structures with cut-out doors and windows (De Maegd 2001, p. 45-68). The plans as well as the description attest to the use of lanes

¹² "continuez ce corps de logis jusques a laultre costez de leaue" (KUL AA n° 2460).

¹³ A similar gallery can be found in the castle at Heverlee, also belonging to the duke of Aarschot. However, here it is incorporated in a large residence that was the center of the barony of Heverlee. In St. Josse we see for the first time an autonomous version of a gallery with a length of 35 meters.

to structure these extensive gardens.¹⁴ There were no less than eight lanes present on the domain, each of which is described in detail in the description. These were flanked with fruit trees and hedges. These straight lines in the design assured visual connections between the different parts of the garden. Simultaneous to the works at St. Josse, the archdukes started with the renovation of Mariemont, Mary of Hungary's hunting pavilion. Here these straight lanes play a very important role in the design of the surrounding parks and gardens (De Jonge 1999, p. 195), used for the hunt as it allows to spot animals from far away.¹⁵

Garden architecture was a popular subject to some sixteenth-century artists, like Hans Vredeman de Vries. Looking at his designs of fantasy gardens (Fuhring 2002, p. 7-119) the gallery typology shows up several times. Again it seems that the main function of these 'open' galleries was to have a view on the surrounding gardens, similar to the gallery at Saint-Josse. Also Derons shows similar long and narrow structures, often along a water feature in his drawings of the eighteenth-century Brussels suburbs (De Jonge 2003, p. 278).

Conclusion

By the end of the sixteenth century Brussels was provided with a suburban belt of manor houses and villas. Not only the Croÿ had their country house in St. Josse, but also cardinal Granvelle (De Maegd 2001, p. 52) and the famous poet Jan Baptist Houwaert, who called it the 'schoonste contreye die in Europa mocht sijn ghelegen' (De Maegd 2001, p. 46). If we continue the first city ramparts, we also find country retreats of the archdukes in Tervuren.

Remarkable is the fact that the works commissioned by Charles II of Croÿ happened almost simultaneously to the restauration works instructed by the archdukes. Starting from 1595 Charles not only refurbished the city residence in Brussels, he also built the new garden pavilion in St. Josse and in addition he completely redesigned the castle at Heverlee¹⁶ and its surroundings. An analogue process happened when the archdukes arrived in the Low Countries in 1598. They were responsible for the restauration of the Coudenberg palace in the city of Brussels and for the renovation of Mary of Hungary's hunting pavilion in Mariemont. In addition they also put the country retreat at Tervuren into service again, thereby creating a similar triangular network of different types of residences.

Even though Charles II of Croÿ did not hold any titles or rights in the Brussels territory, he was represented there by no less than three residences. The main purpose of these was his representation as one of the highest members at the court of the king of Spain and by extension of the archdukes. These restauration plans were all part of the politics of the ostentatious duke of Aarschot to strengthen his power and princely prestige.

When Charles of Croÿ died childless in 1612 he left the country retreat at St. Josse to his wife, Dorothee of Croÿ, after whose death his nephew Alexander of Arenberg inherited the domain (Duvosquel 2002, p. 267-271). However the two domains lose importance almost immediately after

¹⁴ "Une belle dreve allant droicte a la gallerie et maison de plaisance, estant a laultre bout dicelle, contenant en longueur cent apas, et de largeur deux apas et demy, du long de laquelle sont belles hayes plantees au deux costez de sulgustrome, avecq arbres de poiriers et pomiers en nombre de vingt quatre (...)"

¹⁵ The design for the gardens of Mary of Hungary's hunting pavilion was made by the architect Pierre Lepoivre, who often made designs for Charles of Croÿ (amongst others for the residence in Brussels).

¹⁶ The residence that formed the center of the barony of Heverlee was less than a day's journey from Brussels, while other important residences were situated further away in the province of Hainaut.

the death of Charles II of Croÿ¹⁷ and by the eighteenth century there is nothing left of the once extensive estate.

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¹⁷ A document of 1628 testifies to the moving of marble from St. Josse to the convent of the Dominicans in Brussels (Dülmen, n° 100).

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